

# Chan/Zen Buddhist Thought in Tang Poetry: A Translation to Jia Dao's Poems

Author: Ruifeng Dong    Mentor: Paul Rouzer

College of Liberal Arts, Department of Asian Language and Literature



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
Driven to Discover®

This project was supported by the University of Minnesota's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program.

## Introduction

As an artistic apex of Chinese literature, poetry in Tang China is an important and valuable object of study and Chan/Zen (禪 in Chinese) Buddhism is indispensable in the study of poetry from the Tang dynasty.

After Buddhism was firstly spread into China during Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.—220 C.E.), it gradually became part of Chinese culture and in the Tang Dynasty (618 C.E.—901 C.E.), Chan/Zen Buddhism thrived to an unprecedented degree in China, affecting many fields of Chinese culture, especially poetic literature.

### Jia Dao's Biography

Jia Dao 賈島 (779-843), was one of the most important Tang poets, whose impacts affected poetic literature during the late Tang, early Song and later times.

He was a Buddhist monk in his early years, but gave up monastery life and devoted himself to passing the civil service examination (then required to obtain a government position). He died soon right after he was given an assignment to be a government official in South China.

### Comments:

Therefore, according to Jia's background and the historical context of the Late Tang, it is valid for modern readers to study and interpret the thoughts in Jia's poems through a Chan/Zen Buddhist view.

## Method

The project focuses on: To analyze the images and allusions in the author's poems, and to clarify ambiguity with annotations in the comments following the translations.

### 夜坐

蟋蟀漸多秋不淺，  
蟾蜍已沒夜應深。  
三更兩鬢幾枝雪，  
一念雙峯四祖心。

### Meditating at night

More and more crickets mean autumn is deep;  
Toads have already disappeared, and the night should be late.

It is midnight—two branches of snow at my temples;  
At once I thought of Shuangfeng Temple, and the thought of Sizu.

### Comment:

Jia Dao recorded his midnight meditation as a process of the passing of time.

One could probably have better understanding of this poem by interpreting “雙峯 Shuangfeng” as a temple (there was a temple by that name at Jia Dao's time) and “四祖 Sizu” as the fourth Chan master in Tang, which further suggests the author's devout dedication to Chan Buddhism

### 暮過山村

數里聞寒水，山家少四鄰。  
怪禽啼曠野，落日恐行人。  
初月未終夕，邊烽不過秦。  
蕭條桑柘外，煙火漸相親。

### Passing a village at dusk

I hear the cold spring miles away,  
Houses in the mountains have few neighbors.

Weird birds cry in the wilderness,  
The setting sun frightens the traveler.

The new moon won't last the night,  
The border beacon do not go beyond Qin.

From beyond the bare mulberry and cudrania,  
Smoke from cottages becomes close to me.

### Comments:

Image here is not only still, but also gloomy. There are no white clouds but weird birds. This poem could probably be a disruption of Chan Buddhist serenity, which requires quietness and emptiness during meditation.

The third couplet can be difficult to understand. It literally means, “the moon has already risen up while the sun is still setting.” Another note might be helpful that “秦 Qin” here indicates the Northwestern China, and it probably was the place where Jia was located at the time.

### 尋隱者不遇

松下問童子，言師採藥去。  
只在此山中，雲深不知處。

### Looking for a hermit but not meeting him

Below a pine tree I asked a lad,  
He said the master went to collect medicinal herbs.

Just on this mountain,  
Somewhere unknown and deep behind the clouds.

### Comments:

As one of Jia Dao's most famous poems, there can both be a Buddhist view or a Daoist view here in the poetry—mountain located in deep clouds is a very typical image, conveying a kind of mistiness and the mystery of religious belief.

Jia adopted mountain and clouds to show a kind of emptiness in his mind, which matches what is emphasized in the Chan/Zen thoughts. Emptiness is either a way to prepare for meditation, or a result after meditation.

However, one should also notice that such a misty feeling could also reflect Daoist thought, since the mountains hiding in deep clouds are usually where the immortals (仙 Xian) lived. They believed that natural places provide the origin that gives birth to the whole world.

### 南齋

獨自南齋臥，神閑景亦空。  
有山來枕上，無事到心中。  
簾卷侵床月，屏遮入座風。  
望春春未至，應在海門東。

### The South Studio

Alone myself I lie in the South Studio,  
with clear mind and the empty scene.

Mountains come to my pillow,  
But nothing enters my heart.

Curtains are rolled up, and the moon shines near my couch;  
The screen blocks the wind that would blow upon my seat.

Looking forward to the Spring that has not come yet,  
It should be at the East of Haimen.

### Comment:

The first and second couplets both reflected Jia Dao's Chan thoughts in this poem, where empty minds remain with no focus on sightseen (such a huge mountain is nothing in “my” heart).

As for “Haimen,” one could interpret it as a name of a place (in Jiangsu Province), or the estuary in general.

## Conclusion

By studying, translating and reviewing selected Jia Dao's poems from a Buddhist perspective, one can find the image of emptiness and quietness in those poems, which was one of Jia's main techniques used to convey a Chan/Zen Buddhist thought.

One might consider that the emptiness and quietness Jia needed to do were either his preparation before a Chan/Zen meditation in order to make his work successful, or a result after his Chan/Zen work (emptiness and quietness reflected his peaceful mind after meditation).

However, one should also notice that though a Chan Buddhist perspective is a valid approach to interpret Jia Dao's poetry, it is not the only way, because the interpretation of poems is ultimately a matter of judgment.

### Bibliography

1. Li, Jiayan 李嘉言. *Changjiangjishi xinjiao* 长江集新校. Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1983.
2. Ji, Yougong 计有功, et al. *Tangshi jishi* 唐诗纪事. Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu shudian 上海教育出版社, 1948.
3. Wang, Zhongyong 王仲镛. *Tangshi jishi jiaojian* 唐诗纪事校笺. Chengdu: Ba Shu shudian, 1989.
4. Owen, Stephen. *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)*. Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2006.
5. Li, Yi 李艺. “Zhong Wan Tang shifeng de bianhua yu Jia Dao shige chuanguo 中晚唐诗风的变化与贾岛诗歌创作.” *Mingzuo xinshang: Wenxue yanjiu (xiaoxun)* 名作欣赏: 文学研究 (下旬), no. 06, 2008, pp. 24-26.
6. Deng, Guijiao 邓桂姣. “Jia Dao shige de shikong tiyan yu shengming yishi 贾岛诗歌的时空体验与生命意识.” *Qiusuo* 求索, no. 12, 2013, pp. 135-137.
7. Zhang, Yurong 张玉荣. “Jia Dao shige de fojiao yishi 贾岛诗歌的佛教意识.” *Xinsilu* 新丝路, no. 22, 2017, pp. 156-157.
8. Liu, Donglin 柳东林, et al. “Jia Dao shifeng yu fochan sixiang 贾岛诗风与佛禅思想.” *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究学刊, no. 4, 2007, pp. 61-63.
9. Zhao, Hong 赵宏, et al. “Song Chu Wan Tang Ti qinghan kuyin shifeng yu fojiao huaibao 宋初晚唐体清寒苦吟诗风与佛家怀抱.” *The Northern Forum*, no. 4, 2012, pp. 16-20.
10. Mazanec, Thomas J. “Guanxiu's “Mountain-Dwelling Poems”: A Translation.” *Tang Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2016, pp. 99-124.
11. Chen, Xuanyu 陈宣谕. *Libai shige hai yixiang* 李白诗歌海意象. Taipei: Wanjuan lou, 2011.